OE FORM 6000, 2/69

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ERIC REPORT RESUME

ERIC ACC. NO.				
ED 032 344				
CH ACC. NO.	P.A.	PUBL. DATE	ISSUE	IS DOCUMENT COPYRIGHTED? YES ☐ NO ☒
TE 500 362	5	Feb 65	RIEJAN70	ERIC REPRODUCTION RELEASE? YES ☐ NO ☒
				LEVEL OF AVAILABILITY I ☒ II ☐ III

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TITLE
Jargon, Prufrock, and the "Cop-Out".

SOURCE CODE	INSTITUTION (SOURCE)
JIM56550	
SP. AG. CODE	SPONSORING AGENCY

EDRS PRICE	CONTRACT NO.	GRANT NO.
0.25;0.25		
REPORT NO.		BUREAU NO.

AVAILABILITY

JOURNAL CITATION
College Composition and Communication; v16 n1 p27-29 Feb 1965

DESCRIPTIVE NOTE
5 P.

DESCRIPTORS
*English Instruction; *College Students; *Sociolinguistics; *Student Attitudes; *Speech Habits; Language Patterns; Social Dialects; Cultural Traits; Cultural Images; Literature Appreciation; Student Behavior; Cultural Awareness; Social Relations; Language Role; Standard Spoken Usage

IDENTIFIERS
T S Eliot

ABSTRACT
A teacher's developing awareness of his college students' dependence on jargon as the expression of their culture is portrayed with the aid of quotations from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Parallels are drawn between Prufrock's attitudes and student language in the classroom. (AF)

From: College Composition and Communication
Volume 16, Number 1, February 1965.

ED032344

Jargon, Prufrock, and the "Cop Out"

SAVIN COHEN

FOR THE PAST SEMESTER, I have been trying to eliminate some careless habits in the speech of some of my students. What has concerned me especially are not problems in grammar, although these too are my concern, but a jargon prevalent on and off the campus.

I might, for example, ask the following question with regard to Swift's "Modest Proposal:" "Why did Swift handle the subject as a satire instead of direct attack?" Some likely responses would be (with the questionable words italicized):

"Well, he wanted *more or less* to influence . . . . . ."

"He was *like* trying to . . . . . ."

"He could make his message more interesting *'n' everything.*"

"By using this approach, he could [semi-pause] *y'know* get some results . . . . . ."

"He was *sort of* appealing to . . . . . ."

These, then, were some examples: *more or less, like, y'know, sort of, 'n' everything.*

I asked students why these words were prevalent in their speech, especially since they contributed little meaning to what they said. They replied that they had heard this speech daily, from other instructors, their elders, radio and TV programs, etc.

"Not everybody uses them," I said. "Most people on TV programs don't."

"Well, they're like a habit, y'know [*shrug of the shoulder*]—a habit. What's wrong with them?"

I indicated that these words were jargon, that they made no sense in themselves and hence were unnecessary. By the end of the semester students used this jargon less often than before. But not for long. It came back in individual conferences, in class recitations, and in the halls; moreover, students began to resist change somewhere near the middle of the semester, partly because certain linguistic habits are hard to change (as I did understand), and partly because this jargon fulfilled a strong linguistic need (as I did not understand). To remove it left them somewhat, for want of a better word, emasculated.

What need? What feelings or thoughts could this jargon convey? It had been too long with them for novelty. It did not serve as a linguistic shortcut. The words had no significant meanings in themselves. And to say that they were linguistic habits of the age was to beg the question—for persistent linguistic habits persist to satisfy persistent needs of the culture. It was not just the habit that concerned me now. It was something more: their conscious determination to hold on to it. This was a fact that I could not make sense of—this fact of our culture, if you will.

The answer had to lie somewhere in the term "culture," the sum of all things, attitudes, and behavior of a society. All answers do. We know that language is a symbol system of culture. So faithfully does language symbolize culture that we say it "contains" the culture and is its symbolic equivalent. All that exists in a culture one can usually find expressed in language, verbal and non-verbal, provided one knows what to look for and how to look for it. Since jargon is language, my feeling that the jargon of my students made no sense did not altogether make sense to me now either. Since these words did not say much in

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themselves, they had to say something outside themselves; they had to say something else for each speaker, perhaps something about himself.

Every generation has a jargon which characterizes it and the people in it. Quiller-Couch at an earlier time pointed up the circumlocutions which characterized the jargon of the Victorian and post-Victorian ages, ages that valued elegance of manner and clothes, pretension, overstuffed furniture, and gingerbread architecture. The jargon of our own age is racy, in keeping with our own times. It may originate with comedians with large followings. The "cat's meow" of one generation becomes the "real George" of the next, or next half- or quarter-generation, and then it's "razzmatazz." Sometimes it originates with serious public figures who accidentally fall onto an expression or are supplied one by their writers. President Harding's "return to normalcy," Al Smith's "raddio," and President Eisenhower's "finalize" are the innovations of their times. Whether temporary or permanent, words are uttered purposefully, if not always consciously, to convey a feeling or an idea of the moment; moreover, they are received and transmitted by others until they lose their flavor or meaning and are replaced by newer words or by more satisfying older ones. Jargon is a linguistic additive that helps people to express their own culture along with their heritage, to keep up with it, to be with it.

For me, an awareness of the purposes served by the jargon of my students emerged later in the course. We were discussing T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." We know that Prufrock elects to exist by weighing his facts and hedging. He elects not to commit himself to living and not to risk consequences. Shunning the risks of commitment, he cannot savor the joys of commitment. Tomorrow's security is preferable to today's joy. We know, too, that this poem, written in 1917, anticipated the mechanized man of this age, inhibited, indecisive, "formulated":

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
> The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall. . . .

John Ciardi has succinctly listed the present-day forces that have helped to formulate this man:

> So goes the human condition in the age of quintuplicate, W-2, reply by endorsement, social security, Zip Code, table of organization and statutes thereunto appertaining, fingerprints, area code, serial number, account number, application number, employment number, blood type, follicle count, memory banks, and Answer Yes or No Only.

Today's man is Prufrock, and he has bequeathed to his children his culture, his language, his jargon; and his children are the students dispersed throughout the colleges of this country. When they speak to you and me, they speak like Prufrock in almost every utterance, converting his meanings into the jargon of the time, the linguistic signals used by people to tell themselves (as well as you and me at the moment of their speaking) who they are while they are expressing what they mean.

When students answer my questions about Swift's "A Modest Proposal," they say, in effect, that they are not sure of themselves or of what they mean, even when they know that their conclusions are accurate assessments.

"Well, he wanted *more or less* to influence . . . . . ."

"He was *like* trying to . . . . . ."

Nor will Prufrock commit himself.

> In a minute there is time
> For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

And time yet for a hundred indecisions
And for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

Thought and self-analysis occur in our silences. Students fear the silences of their lives, even the split-second silences between sentences, for silences encourage self-thought and doubt, the silences of moments, days, and nights. Jargon is a silence substitute; students say:

"He could make his message more interesting *'n' everything.*" Prufrock says:

"In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo."

When one removes himself from the strife of living, he stands lonely and seeks assurance from others. He gets it from the listener's nod:

". . . and he could [*semi-pause*] y'know get some results." Prufrock says:

"And how should I then presume?
And how should I begin?
And in short, I was afraid."

Assurances are of no consequence, however; a student is ready to abandon his position even before taking it:

"He was *sort of* appealing to . . . . . ." Says Prufrock:

"That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

In effect, they all express the fear of involvement with the responsibilities of the present. Things happen too quickly these days, many of them uncontrollable by anybody. What one does may be a mistake. Later is better than now for commitment:

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me. . . .

At the end of the discussion of Eliot's poem, I wrote the phrases which characterized the students' jargon on the blackboard. They immediately recognized their words as symbols of Prufrock and themselves:

A sophomore said: "It keeps us from taking a stand, more or less."

Another said: "They're like a 'cop out.' "

Now I understand them.

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